Hocking family struck a rich newspaper lode at Kalgoorlie

By Rod Kirkpatrick

When you walk through the front door of the Kalgoorlie Miner, you enter a time warp. The jarrah-trimmed display windows and cabinet and the jarrah door are redolent of a bygone era, an era captured in the photographs on the walls showing the Miner building and its staff from the early days. The Miner is 110 years old in September this year.

The three-storey building itself, although not the original office, was constructed in 1900 on the original site and the façade still proclaims: Hocking & Co. Limited: The Miner & Western Argus Offices. It is a landmark building in Kalgoorlie’s CBD. The rotary letterpress installed in 1901 gathers dust in the disused pressroom at the rear of the building.

Kalgoorlie and other West Australian goldfields towns that emerged in the 1890s were “a Mecca of masculine labour” – and a Mecca for some newspaper proprietors and a misery for others. The first newspaper for Kalgoorlie came off a press established by the sons of a pioneer of the provincial press in Victoria and NSW.

Decimus Horace Mott and Stanley Arthur Mott, two of the 10 sons of George Henry Mott, founder of the Border Post at Albury and an editor and owner or part-owner of various Victorian papers during the second half of the nineteenth century, launched the Western Argus at Kalgoorlie on November 24, 1894, only nine days after their press and type had arrived.

For months the weekly paper lost money. Hundreds of people were leaving Kalgoorlie each week. The Motts knew newspapers; they did not know mining. Enter Sidney Edwin Hocking, who knew both newspapers and mining. Hocking was born at Nairne, South Australia, and educated at Prince Alfred College, Adelaide.

The son of a well-to-do iron founder from the Western Districts of Victoria, Hocking joined the daily South Australian Advertiser in 1874 as a general reporter and became the paper’s mining writer at various fields. In 1889 he went to the still infant mining field at Broken Hill, NSW, as the representative of a syndicate of evening papers in Melbourne and Sydney.

He left Broken Hill in 1893 and headed west. From Coolgardie in 1894 he sent articles to papers in Adelaide, Melbourne and Perth. He established two newspapers in Coolgardie, the Golden Age and the Goldfields Courier. As the editor of those newspapers, he visited Hannans in the eastern goldfields to gauge the progress of the mines. He toured what later became known as the Golden Mile, but it had won comparatively little attention when he visited.

When Hocking went underground at the Great Boulder, he discovered that the miners passed down through the oxidised ore into extremely rich semi-sulphides. Because he had seen something similar at Broken Hill, he recognised the potential of the Great Boulder.

He reasoned that this mine, and others in its vicinity, were most likely on the same gold-bearing lode and should all continue producing at depth. Hocking surmised that this would provide long-term stability for the town and he wanted to be part of it. The next day when Hocking paid a courtesy visit to the offices of the Western Argus to meet Decimus and Stanley Mott, they told him they were unhappy about the prospects of the town and their business was losing money.

The Mott brothers were delighted, and somewhat surprised, when Hocking offered them £250 ($500) for everything – including a small hand press, some old type, stock, paper, the canvas premises and goodwill. The Motts sold on August 6, 1895, to the Coolgardie partnership of the Hockings (Sid had been joined by brother Percy) and James MacCallum Smith. A few weeks later the Great Boulder mine became a huge wealth producer.
MacCallum Smith remained in Coolgardie to run the partnership’s newspapers there and the Hocking brothers shifted to Kalgoorlie in a move that had long-term implications for the daily newspaper yet to be established there. The Hocking brothers produced their first issue of the Western Argus on August 15, 1895.

They responded swiftly to the Great Boulder news and on September 14 they launched Kalgoorlie’s first daily, the Kalgoorlie Miner. MacCallum Smith severed his connection with the Hockings in March 1896 by accepting an offer of £500 ($1,000) cash for his interest in the newly established firm of Hocking and Co.

Sid Hocking promised that the Kalgoorlie Miner – issued on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays until mid-January 1896 and Mondays to Saturdays from then until May 1, 1976 – would be “an entirely independent organ” owing allegiance to no faction or political party.

Two days after the Miner appeared, it had opposition. W.E. Clare, the owner of the Coolgardie Miner and the Goldfields Chronicle, launched the daily Hannan’s Herald in a direct frontal assault on the Kalgoorlie Miner. But the Herald – basically an evening edition of the Coolgardie Miner, transported over the track to Kalgoorlie by cyclists – survived only until September 26, 1896.

Less than a year later, on December 20, 1897, another daily emerged: the Kalgoorlie and Boulder Standard, but it ceased on May 21, 1898. Five years after the Hockings bought the Western Argus for £250 ($500), they refused an offer of £150,000 ($300,000) – walk in, walk out – for their business.

Two months after starting the Miner, Hocking appointed as editor, John Waters Kirwan, who had edited the Port Augusta Dispatch. Kirwan served as editor at Kalgoorlie for 30 years and was elected to both the WA and the Federal Parliaments.

At Kalgoorlie, virtually on the eve of the twentieth century, Sid Hocking was alerted to the fact that the family’s fortunes could change overnight. His brother Percy, the manager of the business, died on March 8, 1900, at the age of 38 after suffering a severe bout of pneumonia and then having a recurrence.

Another brother, Ernest W. Hocking, who had trained as a school teacher and had later become a hardware store proprietor in Broken Hill, managed the newspapers for a few months, but returned to Perth to manage his business interests there. Sid Hocking, 40 and single, ditched mining journalism to become the managing director of the newspapers.

His brother’s unexpected death, without children, had left Sid acutely aware not only of his own mortality but also of the fact that there were no heirs to take over the business. Within six months he married. Four months after Percy Hocking’s death, Sid Hocking met Effie Fen, of South Australia, who was visiting a cousin in Kalgoorlie. Six weeks later Sid married Effie at St John’s Church of England, Kalgoorlie, with his editor Kirwan as best man.

Builders were constructing a new, three-storey building on the site occupied by the Miner. The building was completed before the end of 1900 and on March 29, 1901, the Miner was printed on a new rotary press and the type was set with Linotypes.

It was the first time a 12-page broadsheet issue had been printed and folded in one operation in Western Australia, the Miner said. The original hand press had been capable of printing 100 complete copies an hour. The new press, a single-feeder Wharfedale, was four times as fast with a bigger sheet.

In the new building, fire destroyed the editor’s office and the reporters’ room, including an excellent reference library, on May 26, 1903. But the rotary press and some of the Linotypes remained in use until May 1, 1976, after which the Miner was printed in Perth. The press was still gathering dust at the Miner when I visited in August 2003.

Two of the five WA House of Representative seats in the first Federal Parliament were won by Kalgoorlie editors: John Kirwan of the Miner and Hugh Mahon of the Sun. Edward Hamilton Irving, the sub-editor and a former editor of the Kalgoorlie and Boulder Standard, became the editor of the Miner and Kirwan became the nominal editor-in-chief.

The Hocking family owned the Miner for 75 years. The first change of generational control occurred after 40 years. Sid Hocking, whose health had been failing, died on January
29, 1935, at the age of 74 after 34 years as managing director of Hocking and Co. His eldest son, Jack, aged 34, became managing editor.

Percy Stuart Hocking took charge of the Miner’s mechanical department and Ernest Nicholas (Ning) Hocking became the business manager. Each of the three brothers had been involved in the business since leaving school. Edwin Joe, only 12 at the time, finished his education, joined the firm in 1939 and later took over as manager of the job printing section.

During the 1930s and 1940s, cooperation in the supply of news began to take place between the West Australian and the Kalgoorlie Miner. Stronger ties were formed on March 21, 1951, when the chairman of W.A. Newspapers Pty Ltd., H.B. Jackson, appointed Jack Hocking to the company’s board. The link opened the Miner to other influences that soon affected its format and news presentation. From August 13, 1951, the Miner changed from broadsheet to tabloid size but otherwise retained its old layout.

Gradually, a few two-column paragraphs or headings appeared, in contrast to the tombstone layout that had persisted since the beginning of the century, and a few photographs were used – mainly portraits – whereas previously there had been text only. On October 1, 1951, a direct teletype line was opened between the West Australian and the Miner. On June 17, 1953, the Miner became the last daily in Australia to begin presenting its main news coverage on Page 1.

An episode at the Miner in 1948 became part of the rich folklore of the goldfields. When Albert Laurence Donnelly died on April 14, 1948, after having been employed at the Miner since 1911 and as editor since Irving’s death in 1929, Jack Hocking found it difficult to find a new editor. Eventually, he appointed a man called Malcolm Cook, a schoolteacher in a small country town.

Cook claimed, falsely, to be a Cambridge graduate. It turned out that the Hockings had employed a “terrific con man”, whose real name, among his many aliases, was Murray Beresford Roberts. After masquerading as a doctor in his native New Zealand, he was jailed for two and a half years. Over the years he was involved in a number of other frauds and swindles and was jailed a number of times in Australia. After the Cook experience at the Miner, Jack Hocking did not appoint another editor, simply relying on sub-editors and assuming greater control as editor-in-chief.

The Hocking family’s control of the Miner ended in April 1970 after the second generation had been in charge for 35 years. At a time of optimism on the goldfields, the family sold to Western Australian Newspapers Limited, which had in 1969 been taken over by the Herald and Weekly Times Ltd. Percy Hocking had died in 1963, Ning had retired in 1966, and Jack, at 70, was ready to retire.

Jack Kyle Hocking, appointed manager of Hocking and Co. in June 1970, found that Sir Keith Macpherson, chairman of HWT, “had no interest in the Miner”. Hocking, who had begun his career as a printer, had been a journalist for 10 years, most recently as a sub-editor on the Daily News, Perth. He managed the Miner until the end of 1974, leaving to work on the West Australian as a general sub-editor and then finance sub-editor until his retirement in 1987. In January 1975, the first non-Hocking manager of the Miner, Owen R. Thomas, began his appointment.

By 1976, age was catching up with the machinery at the Miner, especially as a new wave of technology swept the newspaper industry. Facing mounting production problems at Kalgoorlie, the parent company shifted the printing and sub-editing of the Miner to Perth from May 4, 1976, and eliminated the Monday issue. With advances in computer and facsimile machine technology, the sub-editing returned to Kalgoorlie in March 1987, but the printing has remained in Perth. The Monday issue was reinstated on April 2, 1990.

In February 1987, Rupert Murdoch took over HWT (including WAN and the Miner), but Robert Holmes a Court’s Bell group struck a deal with Murdoch and became owner of WAN. In the wake of the share market crash in October 1987, Bell sold to the Bond Group, headed by Perth businessman Alan Bond.

Financial difficulties forced Bond out of mining and out of newspapers and in 1989 the bankers took charge of WAN and the Miner to clear accumulated debts. Meanwhile, the
West Australian had moved from St George’s Terrace, in the heart of the Perth CBD, to Herdsman in the suburbs.

It was not until 1992 that a public company, W.A. Newspapers Holdings Ltd., was floated and a multitude of small shareholders now owned the Miner, its big-brother daily in Perth, the West Australian, and a chain of country papers.

When the Miner turned 100, it published a 100-page centenary supplement, mostly presented in year-by-year flashback form. A serious loss of district population at Kalgoorlie (3,000 people), caused by the slump in goldmining in the 1950s, led to a 15.87 per cent circulation slump at the Miner between 1950 and 1970 and further declines in the seventies. Between 1995 and 2000 the Miner lost 17.89 per cent of its circulation.

Working hard at improving the circulation over the past 20 months has been David Burtenshaw, appointed managing editor in August 2003 after seven months as editor. Burtenshaw, a former sports writer on the Adelaide Advertiser, has boosted the Miner’s sports coverage, mainly with a 12-page sports liftout on Mondays that has especially strong local coverage during the football season. Burtenshaw says the circulation figures have been “up every week since last June”, resulting in a 1.5 per cent increase to 5,746 for the six months to December 31, 2004.

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